



The exhibition, organized by the New-York Historical Society, and the accompanying volume, *Making American Taste: Narrative Art for a New Democracy*, were produced with generous support from Michael Reslan, the National Endowment for the Arts through the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act, the Walter and Lucille Rubin Foundation, Richard Gilder and Lois Chiles, the Mr. and Mrs. Raymond J. Horowitz Foundation for the Arts, the New York Community Trust Joanne Witty and Eugene Keilin Fund, Larry K. Clark, and the Barrie A. and Deedee Wigmore Foundation.



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TELLING TALES

Stories and Legends
in 19th-Century American Art

February 27–June 7, 2015





John Whetten Ehninger (1827–1889). *Peter Stuyvesant and the Cobbler* (detail), 1850. Oil on canvas. The New-York Historical Society, Gift of Mr. Hugh W. Long, 1950.335

This exhibition is a visual anthology of American narrative art from the late eighteenth through the late nineteenth centuries. Featuring styles ranging from Neoclassicism to Realism, the works tell stories that relate to the cultural heritage of Europe, or that reflect American experience, ordinary and exceptional.

For many American artists, Europe’s artistic traditions represented a pinnacle worth emulating. In Europe’s academies, history was the most important subject; history paintings inspired viewers with themes of heroism, moral virtue, or national achievement. The United States had a shorter history, but artists still considered the past to be an instructive prologue. In the first section of the exhibition, *American History Painting*, reconstructions of epochal events and portrayals of historical figures illustrate the nation’s formative narratives.

The language and culture of most white Americans were rooted in England. The second section, *English Literature and History*, includes artworks inspired by Shakespeare and other writers whose popularity spanned the Atlantic. A related section, *Importing the Grand Manner*, features paintings that adhere to the high styles of European art: the Baroque, the Neoclassical, the Romantic. Believing that American taste was in need of elevation, many artists went to Europe to study the Old Masters and to attend art academies where they could learn how best to convey themes of history, literature, mythology, and religion.

Other artists created works that were distinctly American in both everyday subject matter and unadorned style. The section titled *Genre Paintings* focuses on the lives of ordinary people—often in agricultural settings—emphasizing their role as the backbone of democracy while celebrating virtue, faith, practicality, and the value of self-interested commerce. The underlying message of many rural genre scenes was that hard work, particularly on farms, ensured a healthy economy and a good life.

The works in *Economic, Social, and Religious Division* are urban variants of genre paintings. Throughout the nineteenth century, many people moved away from farms, seeking work in urban manufacturing centers, which also attracted immigrants, primarily from Europe. The swelling populations in large cities like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia led to a growing gap between the wealthy and the poor, and mistrust between Protestants and Catholics.

Paintings from the mid- to late nineteenth century provide insight into the most profound of American contradictions: the belief in equality posed against a history and an ongoing pattern of racial oppression. The final section, *Picturing the Outsider*, shows how artists often hinted at the difficult conditions that marginalized people endured. Yet these works reveal a deep ambivalence. Some artists romanticized Native Americans, lamenting the erasure of their subjects’ cultures without questioning the legitimacy of



Tompkins Harrison Matteson (1813–1884). *The Last of the Race* (detail), 1847. Oil on canvas. The New-York Historical Society, Gift of Edwin W. Orvis, 1931.1

national policies that made such injustice possible. Other artists decried the institution of slavery even as they rode the fence regarding abolition and equal rights for African Americans. These mixed messages remind us that as we explore our artistic heritage, it is important to take the makers’ biases and limitations into account.

The works in *Telling Tales* show a culture in the process of defining its ideals and values. They provide an overview of the complex tastes, aspirations, and internal contradictions that marked the first full century of the new democracy. ✨

Telling Tales: Stories and Legends in 19th-Century American Art is adapted from *Making American Taste: Narrative Art for a New Democracy*, organized by the New-York Historical Society.

Cover: Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait (1819–1905). *The Latest News*, 1862. Oil on canvas. The New-York Historical Society, The Robert L. Stuart Collection, the gift of his widow Mrs. Mary Stuart, S-175. Back Panel: Francis W. Edmonds (1806–1863). *Grinding the Scythe* (detail), 1856. Oil on canvas. The New-York Historical Society, Gift of Charles E. Dunlap, 1947.493